

WIND FARM PROPOSED FOR CENTRAL MONTANA TURBINES WOULD TAP THE AIR BLOWING OFF ROCKY MOUNTAINS

By Matthew Brown, AP

BILLINGS MT - A Texas company with Portuguese backing is working with state natural resource officials in central Montana to develop a 300-megawatt wind farm - twice the size of the state's largest existing wind project.

Horizon Wind Energy would erect up to 100 turbines near Martinsdale, about 80 miles east of Helena, to tap into winds sweeping through the Musselshell River valley.

Horizon had been solicited to develop in the area by the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The agency owns about 2,400 acres of school trust land within the 19,000-acre project site.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer and the Montana Legislature have aggressively pursued wind energy over the past several years by courting developers, offering tax incentives that favor wind over fossil fuels and pitching state lands as potential project sites.

However, progress to date remains slow: The state's total energy production from wind remains less than that generated by a single coal-fired power plant.

Only one major project - a 135-megawatt wind farm near Judith Gap - has been completed. And late last year, the administration's efforts suffered a setback when another Texas company, GreenHunter, scaled back a 500-megawatt proposal near Glasgow to 50 megawatts after running into opposition from conservation groups.

But with several new projects now moving forward, state officials insist the industry will ramp up quickly in the next couple of years.

Horizon's Martinsdale Wind Farm is one of at least seven totaling more than 900 megawatts being pursued along a swath of central Montana stretching from Big Timber north to Shelby. That's an area buffeted by strong winds coming off the Rocky Mountains and onto the Great Plains - winds that federal energy officials say are among the best in the United States.

Statewide, officials say, wind farms totaling more than 3,700 megawatts are at various stages of development.

"We're going to see a number of projects coming through here very, very soon," said Chantel McCormick with the state Energy Infrastructure and Promotion Division, part of the Department of Commerce.

McCormick said another major wind company with European roots, Spain's Naturener, is preparing to break ground in March on a 103-megawatt project near Shelby. The

company's McCormick Ranch Wind Park could eventually expand to more than 500 megawatts, she said.

As with Horizon's Martinsdale Wind Farm, the ultimate size of the project will be governed by the availability of transmission line capacity to carry power to markets.

Horizon representative Chris Taylor said the company's first 100 megawatts could be sent through an existing NorthWestern Energy line that runs through the area. After that, the company will need to find additional capacity to complete the project.

"Transmission constraints are the big issue for us, like they are for everybody in Montana," Taylor said.

He said the power will be for both in-state and out-of-state markets.

A major new transmission proposal that would carry power from central Montana to Canada, the Montana Alberta Tie Line, has run into concerted opposition from local landowners and farmers and some environmental groups.

If the line is blocked or delayed, that could significantly choke future wind development.

The first signs of similar opposition with Martinsdale already are emerging.

Gene Leary, 67, owns a ranch within a few miles of the proposed wind farm site. He described wind farms as "visual pollution" and said he worries such projects could mar central Montana's scenic vistas, driving down property values and discouraging tourism.

"It's a feel-good energy thing - clean power appeals to everybody," he said. "A lot of them really haven't thought about the consequences of what it would do in this area."

Horizon's Taylor said he was not aware such complaints were being made and said local officials support the project.

Houston-based Horizon has built wind projects in at least six states and Costa Rica. Founded in 1998, the company was bought last year for \$2.15 billion by Energias de Portugal in a deal that made the Portuguese electric utility one of the largest wind producers in the world.